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VBH BOT FYI Environment

1 message

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Forest preserves eyed for reviving marshland
By Carolyn Rusin Chicago TribLocal reporter
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[PHOTO] Spring Creek Valley Forest Preserve in Barrington Hills in October, last year. (Photo courtesy of the Chicago District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)

In an effort to reintroduce frogs, salamanders and native vegetation into forest preserves in Hoffman Estates and Barrington Hills, engineers have to figure out how to plug thousands of acres of drain tiles so water will pool for marshland, but not go where it's not wanted.

A just-completed survey by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the Paul Douglas Forest Preserve in Hoffman Estates found 700 acres of drain pipes. A similar survey of a estimated 2,500 acres of drain tiles in the Spring Creek Valley Forest Preserve in Barrington Hills is expected to be completed this month.

The old clay drain pipes were used by farmers to drain marshes to grow crops or to make lakes. A contractor "located the drain pipes, then GPS-ed them, making a map," said Frank Veralbi, an Army Corps fish and restoration ecologist. In Barrington Hills, "They're extensive systems that drain the whole land," he said.

The drains needed to be located before temporary valves can be installed to stop the water from seeping through, he said.

"That's going to help us figure out how the project will affect surrounding land. If the water is going to come back in, we have to make sure it stays. The whole idea is to create marshland," said Nicole Roach, an Army Corps civil engineer and project manager.

"The beauty of it is, we can figure out what valves would be left on and what would be off. The whole idea is to avoid tearing up the land and removing drain tiles."

But to reverse engineer the marshland, care must be taken to prevent flooding elsewhere.

"Whatever we do, we can't affect neighboring properties," said Dan White, a landscape architect for the Cook County Forest Preserve District and liaison between the district and Army Corps for the projects. The tiles are buried, he said. "They're long linear segments put where standing water caused trouble."

The idea to rehydrate the soil, remove invasive species and replenish native ones surfaced about eight years ago. The forest preserve district asked the Army Corps for help with restoration work at the two preserves where there are ponds and wetlands.

"It all depends on each circumstance and what's happened with the topography in the area," White said of creating small marshes.

The Army Corps' Continuing Authorities Program or CAP for water resource-related projects involving birds, fish and reptiles allows up to \$5 million as long as the work improves the environment and is in the public interest.

Work at Spring Creek Valley is estimated to cost \$6.6 million and another \$7.5 million for Paul Douglas.

"The project was on hold for a couple of years because of the lack of funding," Roach said.

The forest preserve district has to pay 35 percent of the total cost of each project, minus the appraised value of the land, she said.

Federal money is released in stages, with some coming last fall for the feasibility studies and analysis of soil, biology and ecology at both preserves.

To study the 3,800-acre preserve in Barrington Hills, \$300,000 was released last year with an estimated \$184,000 in quarterly payments coming this year, Roach said. For the 1,300-acre preserve in Hoffman Estates, \$250,000 was released last year with an estimated \$100,000 to come this year, she said.

When ready, Veralbi said temporary valves will be closed or turned off and left for a couple of weeks to see where water sits and what areas have a potential to flood. It also will help to determine how many native plants are needed.

"It will rehydrate those areas that were native wetlands," he said.

If it works, permanent valves could be installed, but that construction is not scheduled to start until June 2013, Roach said. Each phase, from design to final planting, has to be approved by the forest preserve district and Army Corps.

Once the feasibility studies are complete, public hearings will be set on the plans. A meeting last week on the proposals drew people from the Riding Club of Barrington Hills and Barrington Countryside Park District, which is adjacent to an entrance and parking area along Bateman Road, off Algonquin Road.

It's too soon to say what, if any, public access would be provided to the restored wetlands, officials said.

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